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Balloons Took CIA Manuals To Nicaragua

Scaring Regime Was Apparent Aim

Associated Press

The CIA distributed some of its controversial Nicaraguan rebel manuals earlier this year by attaching them to balloons and floating them into the leftist-ruled country, administration and congressional officials said yesterday.

The officials, who insisted on anonymity, said the CIA's apparent purpose was to scare Nicaragua's Sandinista government by creating the impression that the U.S.-backed insurgency was a more serious threat than it was.

But the officials said the program was terminated after fewer than 100 manuals were sent aloft from Honduras in March because funds for the covert operation were becoming increasingly scarce. They also said the balloon action had no discernible effect on the Nicaraguan government.

The 90-page, Spanish-language manual, entitled "Psychological Operations in Guerrilla War," suggested "selective use of violence" to "neutralize" Nicaraguan officials, creating "martyrs" for the cause and coercing Nicaraguans into carrying out rebel assignments.

The House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence concluded Wednesday that the CIA's production of the manual violated a 1982 law barring efforts to overthrow the Nicaraguan government, but it blamed the manual on "negligence, not intent to violate the law."

About 2,000 copies, printed in Honduras, were distributed to soldiers of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest CIA-backed rebel force, a year ago. But the ones attached to the balloons were part of a 3,000-book edition printed at CIA headquarters in Langley, Va., and were coated with plastic to make them water-resistant, the officials said.

One member of the House intelligence committee said CIA officials informed the panel that toys were also included in the packages carrying the manuals. He added that committee members expressed disbelief and amusement upon learning of the balloon action.

Another official said the CIA used specially designed balloons capable of carrying objects as heavy as the manual. He said similar balloons were used by the CIA in propaganda operations against the communist government of Czechoslovakia in the 1950s.

The officials could not explain how the manual, which was written as a lesson book for soldiers on psychological warfare, would be useful to Nicaraguan peasants who might find them after they land.

One official suggested that "it was meant to scare" the Sandinistas.